The Paradox of Apology

Or, why everyone believes in miracles

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There is a minor grievance I have been nursing for some time now, against a friend who uninvited me from a party he threw. First he invited me, then he changed his mind about the composition of the party—not without reason, I'll grant—and so he uninvited me. It did not cause a rupture in our friendship; we remain on good terms, except for the rare occasions when it comes up, and I make it clear that I am still a bit annoyed.

Obviously I'd be better off forgetting about this, but I can't, not without his help. And I know he'd love to help, because he hates when I bring it up. If I could tell him what it is that he should do or say to erase my irritation, I'm sure he'd do it. But I myself don't know. It's possible that a simple "I'm sorry" would do the trick, but one way to definitively disable the power of those words is by instructing someone to say them. And I have to admit that whenever I imagine him apologizing, I imagine him doing so grudgingly, formulaically, in a "let's get this over with" spirit that only increases my resentment. Apparently, I want the kind of apology I can't even conceive of.

Sometimes you want something from someone, but you cannot see how they could possibly give it to you, because there appears to be a conceptual incoherence—something close to a contradiction—in the description you would give of what it is that you want. The word for this phenomenon is: miracle. I need him to perform a miracle.

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A miracle is a paradoxical event, one whose very description seems to contain an internal tension that would ensure it couldn't come about, and yet, somehow, inexplicably, it does. For example, if an amount of oil that is only enough for one night lasts for eight nights, that is a miracle: the miracle of Hanukkah. Jesus walking on water is a miracle because walking and on water do not go together, at least not for something the size and shape of a human being. If I showed you a square circle, that would be a miracle too. A miracle is a species of inexplicable event, one whose inexplicability is internal to the event itself. By contrast, if we see some flashing lights in the sky and can't yet explain them, but expect that with more information, we might, that is not yet a miracle. It's just a mystery.

People tend to say that they do not believe in miracles, but people can be wrong about what they believe. Miracles happen to all of us, and in fact everyone does believe in them. The endurance of the oil, Jesus walking on water—those are divine miracles, which is to say, miracles that are the products of divine intervention in human affairs. Only some people believe in divine miracles. But everyone believes in social miracles. A social miracle is the product of human intervention in human affairs: instead of God making something possible although we cannot see how, it is human beings, working together, who make something possible although we cannot see how.

One example of a social miracle is: the perfect gift. Economists routinely point out that buying each other gifts is less efficient than gifting cash, and they have a point.

If what's in box #1 is fixed, whereas you get to select what goes into box #2, and you can choose anything whose cost is no more than what's in box #1, would it ever make sense to prefer box #1? Yes: when it contains the perfect gift. It is true that most people are satisfied with giving and receiving subpar gifts that fall far short of miraculousness, settling for signaling care and bowing to convention, insisting that it's the thought that counts. Nonetheless, the few serious and dedicated gift-givers out there are committed to putting something in box #1 that makes you sincerely prefer it to what you yourself deemed best. When they succeed, they astonish you by giving you something worth more, to you, than the thing you want most.

Trust is another example of a social miracle. When I trust you, I hold beliefs about the future (that you will do what you say, that you will not betray me, that you will be there for me, and so on) that are not grounded purely in the evidence. A detached third-party observer will make different predictions from mine, because his are based merely on observations as to how you have behaved in the past, whereas I have a connection to you, I care about you, I believe in you and in the force of your promises. And—this is equally important—I see my belief in you not as overconfident but rather as the right and reasonable one for me to have. (If I judge that my belief in you is irrational, then I do not trust you. In such a case I might, for example, engage a therapist to disabuse me of the relevant belief.)

If you find it hard to say how it can be rational for a belief to outstrip the available evidence, then you find it hard to explain how trust is so much as possible—but this is far from saying that you trust no one. You are willing to engage in this practice even though its workings are mysterious to you, even though it is not under your control, even though "just deciding" to trust someone whom you distrust is about as reasonable a proposition as "just deciding" to walk on water.

The one thing you can never do with miracles is expect them to take place. Miracles, almost by definition, have got to come as a surprise. This makes apology especially miraculous, as it is a miracle tasked with invoking a second miracle.

Even when you know that you are the one who is in the wrong, and that you mistreated someone you're close to, and that you'd really like to repair the relationship, it often feels as though there is some psychological block standing between you and the step you know you need to take toward reconciliation. Faced with your victim, you struggle to push the apologetic words out of your own mouth. What blocks apology? The standard answer is that we are selfishly reluctant to own up to wrongdoing. I think that is not right. What blocks the would-be apologizer is something different from egoism or stubbornness.

Consider: I say something that hurts my friend's feelings, she calls me out on it, and I—defensive and dismissive—refuse to apologize. It is entirely imaginable that immediately after our acrimonious parting, I call up my sister and the confession

tumbles out of me: "I had a hard day, I was impatient and stressed all day long, and I ended up hurting someone's feelings. I refused to take responsibility for it, too, though I should have—in short, I was a jerk." In the presence of my sister, I am not only ready to own up to what I did, I jump at the opportunity to do so. So the first question that must be asked about apology is: Why is it so much easier to "own up" to what I did when the person I wronged is not there to hear it?

The key is that I am not seeking forgiveness from my sister, and that means she is not going to be scrutinizing what I tell her: she is not in the business of assessing whether the contrition I am expressing strikes her as "genuine" sorrow, she does not harbor a suspicion that I might be papering over my misdeed, she is not inclined to wonder whether I "truly" understand that I did something wrong, or whether I am "really" taking responsibility, or "fully" committed to not acting in that way again. When I am talking to my sister, I do not need to worry about whether I am "coming across" as sincere. Apologizing is not like having a conversation with someone—it is like taking a test.

And it is a really hard test. In order to apologize, you have to avow the offending action as your own, otherwise you'd have nothing to apologize for; but you also have to disavow it, otherwise you wouldn't be apologizing. You have to present the action as something you saw fit to do, which is to say, something that didn't just arise accidentally in conjunction with your behavior but showed up as choice-worthy to your mind's eye—and then also to insist that you don't see that action from your mind's eye, but instead from the victim's perspective, as an unacceptable object of choice. What you feel about it is not the eagerness of the agent that you are but the genuine sorrow and regret born from channeling the mindset of the victim that you are not. The fact that we are often apologizing for what we did in the past does not resolve this tension. If your past self were truly past, if you found her point of view truly alien—for instance, you couldn't even remember doing it—you couldn't apologize. You can only apologize to the extent that you can inhabit the point of view of the self that chose to do that action. You must see the world through her eyes—but then also, at the same time, not.

When apologies fail, it's because they can't square this circle. People express sorrow and empathy without taking responsibility: "It's terrible what you're going through." Or they take responsibility but they don't seem to feel bad enough to suggest that they really disavow what they did. Or there is an element of contrition and an element of accountability, but over the course of the apology the two items become detached from one another: I'm sorry you underwent Y, and it is true that I did X, but it's not my fault that X led to Y. When I detach the object of my responsibility from the object of my regret, that is called "making excuses for myself." You are right to feel as bad as you do but I was also right to act as I did; what I avow and what I disavow are two different things. The characteristic ingredients of successful apology—explicit acknowledgment of fault and wrongdoing, sincere contrition, offers of compensation that reflect the severity of the deed, credible commitments to turning over a new leaf—

are all ways of trying to perform this alchemy of mixing avowal with disavowal. And yet this task, for all its difficulty, is nothing more than a prelude, because forgiveness is a second, distinct miracle over and above the miracle of apology.

In order to forgive me—as opposed to excusing my behavior, or brushing away the slight aside as insignificant—you have to both hold me responsible and absolve me of responsibility. Those are feats that you have to perform; I cannot perform them for you, no matter how well I apologize. Apology cannot produce the forgiveness at which it aims, which means that apology is a miracle that serves only to set the stage for a second and independent miracle. Apologizing is like trying execute an alley-oop with a player who refuses to get anywhere near you. It's no wonder the words stick in your throat.

But is apology always paradoxical? Is forgiveness always a feat? Consider two imaginary scenarios.

1. Subway Stomp: You are on a crowded subway car. The train lurches. You step—hard!—on someone's foot. You see them wince in pain and immediately blurt out: "I'm sorry!" You are not just empathizing with the fact that their foot got stepped on, as you might do if you were a spectator to the interaction. You feel bad that it was you who did the stepping, and you express this feeling readily, directly, immediately. But what about the fact that it wasn't your fault the car was crowded, or that it lurched, or that you hadn't intended to step on anyone's foot? Neither you nor the stompee is drawn to worry about these questions. You are eager to apologize, your victim is eager to forgive, and everyone moves on with their lives.

Is this a real apology? The stomper is not so much "taking responsibility for wrongdoing" as making it clear that no harm was meant, and the stompee is not offering forgiveness so much as reassurance: "I didn't interpret your stomp as an act of hostility." The parties are merely clarifying the absence of ill will, which is why the exchange runs so much more smoothly than those tasked with dispelling it. But while all those points are correct, they focus on the wrong place. The important question is this one: Why do we clarify the absence of ill will by going through the motions of the ritual by which we usually exorcise its presence?

2. Party Stomp: You and I have never liked each other, but we've suppressed our animosity for the sake of our mutual friend Paul—until today. He's invited us both to his party, we've drunk too much, and the tensions between us boil over. We start hurling insults, and at some point during our heated exchange I spitefully stomp on your foot. A hush falls over the crowd, and Paul appears. He is distraught by what has happened in his own house, and both of us feel genuinely bad about ruining the party. For Paul's sake, I apologize to you for stomping on your foot; for Paul's sake, you forgive me. For the rest of the party we mostly avoid each other. Life goes on.

Unlike the Subway Stomp, the apology in Party Stomp meets the avowal condition easily: there is no question that I intended to hurt you. My action was not an accident;

it was directly attributable to my ill will towards you. I am responsible. The problem here is the disavowal condition. Was I actually upset that I had upset you? Probably not, and neither I nor the stompee is under that impresssion. If someone were to say, "You two are only going through this ritual for Paul's sake," we'd each say, "Obviously!" There is no doubt that everyone just wanted to move past the unpleasant outburst. Once again, the question we should be asking is: Why do we move past unpleasant outbursts by apologizing?

If the apologies I've described in Subway Stomp and Party Stomp are very far from the Platonic Ideal of Perfect Apology, that's not because I've chosen strange examples. Those are in fact perfectly ordinary and familiar contexts for apologizing. What's strange is apologizing itself. Avowing and disavowing are like oil and water; we can posit that they are perfectly mixed in the Platonic Ideal of Perfect Apology, but it is not clear how often we meet with the relevant mixture out in the wild. So the question we ought to be asking is: Why is it that we so often find ourselves invoking this otherworldly ideal in the conduct of everyday life?

Apologizing feels like a test because it is one: unlike my sister, my victim hears what I say in the light of the Platonic Ideal of Perfect Apology. That is why it is always possible for her, if she is not feeling up to forgiving, to pick out some way in which I have fallen short. Perhaps I didn't do quite enough to convey the depth of my contrition and regret, or, contrarily, perhaps I failed to emphasize my own causal role in what occurred—the better I do one of those things, the worse I tend to do the other one.

Most gifts don't do more than keep the hope of the Perfect Gift alive; the same is true for most ordinary apologies, and that is why we don't generally worry about how, if push came to shove, I'd manage to avow and disavow, or how you'd manage to condemn and absolve. We can think of apologies in cases like Subway Stomp and Party Stomp as a kind of handshake in which two people both affirm their commitment to believing that a certain kind of miracle—or rather, a certain pair of miracles—is possible.

And even this handshake can be tricky to pull off. Because apologizing is a ritual, a kind of performance, the conditions of successful uptake are complex. Something in my tone, my word choice, my facial expression, my affect, might lead you to think: "Apology is not on the table for us. All she'll ever do is empathize, she'll never take responsibility." Or the other way around. The development of an intimate relationship usually involves becoming adept at interpreting one another's idiolects of apology and forgiveness, so that apologies come off without a hitch.

But every once in a while, the element of the test comes to the fore: you do something really bad—infidelity is the classic example—and now the question is, can you pull it off? Can you apologize? The question is not only a question about the sincerity of your

commitment to change, or the depth of your contrition, or my generosity of spirit. It's a question about whether you, in apologizing, can succeed in gesturing at Apology, about whether I, in forgiving, can evoke Forgiveness. These performances are fraught and dangerous, and we never know what will come of them. Even if all goes well, and the whole thing comes off, and we move on, we will forever remember those moments when it was touch and go, because each was waiting on the other to perform their miracle.

It is worth distinguishing social miracles from social mysteries. Once I was the only person to show up to a yoga class, and I was pleased at the prospect of a private instruction, only to discover that my limbs seemed to be made of lead. Easy poses were difficult, hard ones were impossible. I assumed I was coming down with a cold and forgot the whole experience—until a few months later, when, during my next solo class, history repeated itself. And that is how I learned that for all the years I have been doing yoga, a bunch of strangers have, without ever touching me, been helping me lift my arms and legs. I have no idea how they do this. The power of group exercise is a social mystery.

Another example is movie theaters. Because I run movie events, I am now regularly in the habit of watching a movie on my own the night before watching it in the theater, and I have done this enough times to be skeptical of claims that there is a special kind of movie you have to watch on the big screen. Every movie is that kind of movie. The theater utterly transforms the moviegoing experience, no matter how quiet or contemplative the movie is. I won't say that I enjoy the worst movie in a theater more than the best movie on my computer, but the truth is not far from that. How can people I don't know, who I don't talk to, who I'm not even looking at, change the way I take in images on the screen?

If I knew more about psychology, or evolution, or the chemistry of my brain, I'd have the solution to these social mysteries. This is what makes them mysteries and not miracles. But no amount of scientific prowess could demystify the duet between the one who feels angry and hurt and suspicious and the one who is guilty and ashamed and defensive about making her feel that way. At bottom, the person who apologizes and the person who forgives say the very same thing: "Even if things got much worse between us than they are now, so bad that we couldn't imagine saying these very words, we would still say them."

There is no way to orchestrate this performance. No one can really believe in an apology until after it happens. That's the telltale mark of a miracle.

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